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ABSTRACT

A study of the pronunciation of an adult male Swahili speaker, a native and long-term resident of Mombasa Old Town, supplemented with notes on other adult speakers, suggests a new account of glides and phonological change in this variation of the language. The asymmetrical distribution of the two glide types (palatal and labiovelar) is analyzed and compared to an analysis of Comorean. One interpretation is that the palatal glide has in many cases lost its autonomous status, its palatal component being redistributed over the associated consonant. A parallel phenomenon in the case of the other glide is proposed. The complex phonetics of the Mombasan variety are outlined. Evidence suggesting that this situation reflects a historical development in Mombasan Swahili is presented briefly. An 11-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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GLIDES AND PHONOLOGICAL CHANGE IN MOMBASAN SWAHILI

John Kelly

When I was first introduced by Jack Carnochan to the study of Swahili, some twenty or so years ago, the outlines of phonetics and phonology published in the then standard reference grammars such as Ashton (1944) and Polomé (1967) were remarkably bland. In the matter of the post-consonantal glides, for instance, the information provided was usually that there are two of these, y and w. Something might be said in addition about distribution — and that would be the sum of the discussion. The rest, we had to assume, was self-evident and not particularly interesting.

But work I have carried out on the speech of native Mombasans of the Old Town suggests to me that the situation with regard to the post-consonantal glides is not as simple as this. Firstly, the details of the phonetics are relatively complex, and worth describing for their own sake. And in addition the facts of the phonetics, taken in conjunction with others of distribution and frequency, are suggestive of a development in Swahili phonological structure.

The material on which this paper is based is drawn in the main from notes made on the pronunciation of an adult male speaker who has been a long-term resident of the Mombasa Old Town; these are supplemented with notes on other adult speakers of similar pedigree.

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The notes were made partly in Mombasa and partly in Britain whilst my main informant was resident there. In what follows examples in Swahili orthography will be italicised and a sans serif face will be used as a phonological script. C, G and V are used for 'consonant', 'glide' and 'vowel'; and the configuration CG will be called, for the purposes of this discussion, a 'combination'. Such things as vy- in e.g. *vyote* 'all' (Cl. 8) or kw- in e.g. *kwangu* 'my' (Cl. 15) which arise from the conjunction of morphological elements vi- and ku- and following stem-initial vowels, are taken to be 'combinations', as well as CG combinations that relate to no such morphological constituency, since what is to be said affects both kinds of CG equally. The phenomena under scrutiny appear to be common to all word-classes and to operate at all structural places. Examples can, then, be drawn from right across the lexicon.

The first striking thing about CG in Swahili is that the distribution of the two G types, palatal (y) and labiovelar (w), is not symmetrical with regard to the preceding C. This lack of parity is noted by writers as early as Steere (1884); and it is solved, to an extent, by Harris (1947) in his discussion of some Comorean material. The situation is that the labiovelar G appears after p, b, m, t, d, s, n (alveolar), t (dental), k, g, ng', but not after f or v. The palatal G is found after only p, f, and v. Immediately, two questions arise. Firstly, why isn't the distribution the same for the two cases, there being no universal debarring of such combinations as fw or ky? Secondly, given that the distribution *is* asymmetrical, why is it asymmetrical in just this way? The answer to the first question may, of course, entail the answer to the second.

Harris's partial answer has to do with some of the missing combinations. In a section of his discussion devoted to 'Breaking phonemes up into a sequence of other phonemes' he takes Comorean ch, the correspondent in Comorean of Mombasan dental t, as k+y, sh as s+y, ny as n+y and j as d+y. The benefits he claims for this analysis are

- it 'eliminates four phonemes, on grounds of distribution and

phonetic symmetry'

- it 'will broaden [the] distribution [of y] which will now approximate that of w'
- instead of a direct k to ch morphophonemic change in such forms as *cheupe* 'white' (Cl. 7) it introduces a morphophonemic change ki to ky 'which may parallel other morphophonemic changes'. The 'other changes' Harris has in mind here are no doubt those such as muV- to mwV-.

The interpretation suggested by Harris for these four items in Comorean can be generalised over a larger area of the consonant inventory and a table of the following kind tentatively set up as one interpretation of the Mombasan Swahili consonant system:

p+y	f(y)	t+y	s/sh	k+y	sh/t (dental)
b+y	v(y)	d+y	z/d(dental)	g+y	z/d (dental)
m+y	ny (?)	n+y	ny		

This extension of the Harris analysis has the advantage of broadening the distribution of y to an optimal range, namely, after *all* consonants, and of eliminating yet more items, so e.g. s and z, from any list of basic phonological consonantal elements.

It has a number of other virtues

- it accords with such reconstructions as we have for a postulated common language (Guthrie 1970) in respect of both the elements included in that common language and the changes envisaged in the historical development of some of these elements in combination. Polomé has pointed out with reference to Harris's work that it too did this same thing, that it 'hinted rather nicely at the diachronic development of the phonemes', though Harris arrives at his re-phonemicisation in the course of a purely synchronic analysis.

- it accords with some of the morphophonological relationships to be observed in the present-day language. Cases in point are causative forms such as *takata* 'be clean'/*takasa* 'make clean' or verb-noun derivations such as *finyanga* 'pot'/*ufinyanzi* 'potting'.

- it produces an outcome in the majority of cases that is, in surface terms, simpler, that is, C elements instead of CG ones. As a consequence of this more of the language is brought closer, in its surface structure, to the canonical Swahili CV syllable shape.

The table, and the interpretations it contains, appears to have at least one other advantage. For, by taking fy as p+y, it suggests *prima facie* that there is no possibility in Swahili of fw, at least from a CG source, since w and y are in system as G after C. If, then, p+y is fy and p+w is pw, then fw is not going to arise unless through some other derivation. In like fashion we might predict the non-appearance of sw, something that is discussed in more detail below. But tw (dental t) does occur, which, since this t is given in our table as being from k+y, suggests either that w and y should not be thought of as being in system in quite this simple way, or that there is a separate derivation for tw with dental t.

The upshot of the above situation is an interpretation, possessed of both synchronic and historical plausibility, in which the y glide has in many cases lost autonomous status, its palatal component being redistributed over (or 'through': the metalanguage is not very happy) the associated C.

The main purpose of this paper is to draw attention to a parallel phenomenon in the case of the other glide. In the speech of my Mombasan informant the phonetics of this is complex. My transcriptions show three different tokens for this item. These are given ad hoc notations here in bold and are as follows:

- a voiced rounded labiovelar approximant (**W**)

- a voiced labiodental approximant (**V**)
- a voiced spread velar approximant (**U**)

Their distribution is such that **W** occurs only with preceding velar or palatoalveolar C, **V** with preceding alveolar or velar C, and **U** only with preceding bilabial C. Both s and dental t are rare in my material as C in Cw. In the case of dental t I have two words, *mtwa* 'louse' and *kitwa* 'head': the first takes **U**, the second **V**, so there is no generalisation to be made about dental t and the phonetics of the following glide. The combination sw is in a different case. This is rare by virtue of the fact that it is non-Swahili in origin. The dictionaries contain only four items, *nswi* 'fish', *swala* 'Grant's gazelle', *swila* 'spitting cobra' and the verb *swaga* 'to drive'. Of these *nswi* is obsolete, and *swila* doubles with the canonical Swahili form *fira*, which is disfavoured probably as a result of the entry into Swahili of a homonym of Arabic origin with a sexual meaning. The word *Swahili* itself is also, of course, of Arabic origin. The combination sw can then be left out of account as being a marginal pattern of external provenance.

The three phonetic items represented in an *ad hoc* fashion above as **W**, **V** and **U** have one thing in common when viewed as manifestations of the glide element w. In the case of **W** the phonetics of the glide component include both a velar and a labial element, but this type occurs only after phonetic items that are themselves velar or rounded. In the first category are k, g and ng', in the second is sh. So the addition made by the phonetics of the G element is of one feature only, labiality in the case of the velar set, velarity in the case of sh. The same holds for the other places of articulation: in each case just one feature is added. So, for alveolar items, the phonetics of the G element is a labial (in precise terms labiodental) articulation, for labial ones it is a velar articulation. The labiodental articulations that manifest w after alveolar items are not systematically velarised: and the velar approximants that manifest it after labials are not rounded. Insofar as there is variability in the patterns

observed it pushes the tendency described above still further, as it takes the following forms

- **V** can alternate with **W**, apparently freely, after velars. This removes the rounding element from the labiality associated with **w**.
- **U** can alternate with zero. In my material there appear such lexical items as

bwana	mister
jibwa	large dog
kaumwa	kalumba root
kimwondo	shooting-star
zimwi	goblin
mwana	child

My impressionistic transcriptions for these show strong velarisation centred at the place of the bilabial consonant b or m, but no appreciable glide-like feature between this consonant and the following vowel. There is, though, a marked difference in vowel quality to be perceived in many of the vowels adjacent to these labial consonants. So, for example, the accented (first) vowel of *tope* 'mud' is different from the accented (second) vowel of *kibobwe* 'cummerbund' by virtue of being fronter. *Kibobwe* is one of the words for which I have a version without a glide: and the difference between the relevant part of that version of *kibobwe* and the relevant part of *tope* resides entirely in the secondary articulatory effects at the labial consonant place and in the associated vowel qualities.

The result of this state of affairs is to redistribute the phonetic constituency of the glide element, producing in the second case a situation where there is no autonomous phonetic element at all to be recognised after C. To put the thing into segmental terms, the glide has been 'reduced to zero', though it will be clear from the description above that this characterisation is less than accurate. Here, as

often elsewhere, a strictly segmental approach to matters phonetic and phonological has the effect of obscuring what is important. An earlier reference to the features discussed here (Kelly 1989) deals with them as 'prosodic categories' F (= front) (the y glide) and B (= back) (the w glide). In such a treatment the velarisation effect noted throughout -VCGV in e.g. *kibobwe* is treated as a unitary thing with an autonomous status.

There is a certain amount of documentary evidence to suggest that the situation described goes back in time. Older dictionaries carry such entries as *bana* for *bwana* (Sacleux 1939) and *sala* for *swala* (Krapf 1882): Sacleux gives a wide range of other forms in which Cw items alternate with variants without the G element. Examples are *nsi* for *nswi*, *bakia* for *bwakia*, *bata* for *bwata*, *chago* for *chwago*, *gaguna* for *gwaguna*, *kaba* for *kwaba*, *kacha* for *kwacha* and many more. But the majority of these variant pairs in the dictionaries arise across different varieties of Swahili, one version in one variety, the other in another. The material under examination in this paper suggests that a drive towards the reorganisation of CGV to CV is going on within one single present-day variety.

If this is so it is perhaps to be seen as the end-point in a chain of development, a development which may perhaps have run its course a hundred years ago in some other varieties of the language. The chain of development would be from CV- to CG- to C. All the w-type G elements under consideration here are derived from postulated earlier vowels. So **kùàdé*, **kúápà* and **kúé* are given by Guthrie (1970) as the antecedents of modern *kwale* 'partridge', *kwapa* 'armpit' and *(m)kwe* 'in-law'; and, in Meinhof (1932), kui, mûa, pua, tu+ala and tua for lexical items that all have w in modern Mombasan Swahili: *nswi* 'fish', *nwa* 'drink', *pwa* 'shore', *twaa* 'take', *(m)tw(ana)* 'servant'.

Bakari (1985) has taken glide-formation in the living varieties of Swahili to be 'motivated by the structure of the language itself, the desire to simplify the structure. The optimum preferred syllable structure is CVCV... By eliminating a concatenation of vowels by

gliding them, a less complex structure is arrived at'. Whether CGV is a 'less complex' structure than CVV is a matter for debate: but what is certainly true is that CGV is a step on the route from CVV to CV.

Bakari further draws attention in this connection to a tendency on the part of younger speakers to use such forms as vangu and vetu for the more usual vyangu and vyetu, a development in the case of the y glide that looks like the counterpart to some of what is described for w above.

Other phenomena can be mentioned that fit into this overall picture. One is the favouring in all varieties of Swahili of such forms as *mzee* 'old person' and *zaa* 'give birth' as against the older, and now obsolete, *mvyele*, *vyaa*. Interestingly, doublet forms survive in the cases of *ngozi* 'skin' as against *ngovi* 'foreskin' and *mwizi/mwivi* 'thief', where in each case both forms conform to the CV syllable type: but stems such as *-vyele* and *-vyaa* with CGV have not endured alongside their CV counterparts.

The curious array of phonetic events that relate to the phonological w glide element in Mombasan Swahili CG combinations can, then, best be interpreted as a stage in the history of a sound-change that has the effect of bringing into being structures of an optimally simple CV kind: this change in the nature of the w-glide, now in its early stages, parallels an earlier one affecting the y glide element which is in its final stage. It is interesting to speculate on what could be the outcome of this situation. We have noted above that the accented vowels of the two words *kibobwe* and *tope* are different The emergence of these two qualities alongside the disappearance of the glide elements is highly reminiscent of such well-known developments as the umlaut of Germanic languages: we might predict an overall chain of development of the kind

(C)VCGV > (C)**V**CV and (C)VCV > (C)VCV

where **V** is a different vowel from V. And it might not be too fanciful

to label this Mombasan Swahili development 'w-umlaut', were it not that such labels are usually less than helpful. What is worth noting here is that the details of the material and the interpretation of it that is proposed throw light on the developmental mechanism of this kind of change. The question of whether the 'umlaut' phenomenon is to be construed as an 'effect at a distance' or as being mediated via the intervening consonant is answered here in favour of the latter hypothesis.

But the imagined, and natural, course of these things will perforce interact with social and cultural factors. The existence of an institutionalised writing system and of growing literacy, together with the pressures of standardisation as expressed through education and the media will all have their effects on the direction taken by language change. In the case under discussion the writing system formulated and promulgated during the twenties and thirties of this century reflects a variety of the language at a stage in which vy- forms have yielded to z- forms and in which w- forms have fully present glide elements. Such a writing system masks very effectively and in perpetuity processes of change and the patterns of symmetry or asymmetry they result in.

Given these considerations, there is no question of predicting an outcome for the phenomenon described here. But it would be at least illuminating to have more information, of a systematic kind, on the recent history and ecology of the **V/W** variation after velars, which, if the interpretation sketched in this paper is correct, and given ideal conditions, should tend in one direction rather than the other. Even without that, though, this material is valuable, for a number of reasons: firstly, for the view it gives into the life-history, as it were, of a sound-change; secondly as a good example of a sound-change that is neither instantaneous nor categorial and which has all the other characteristics of what Labov (1981) has called 'Neogrammarian sound-change'; and lastly as a demonstration of the way in which attention to phonetic detail and to the ranges of its variability regularly leads to fruitful insights into the workings of other levels of language structure.

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